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SUBJECT: ELECTIONS: THREE WEEKS TO GO

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1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Prime Minister Manning dissolved Parliament on September 28, calling elections for November 5. His People's National Movement (PNM) comes into the race with several advantages, but also faces dissension in its ranks and public weariness over its continuance in office. The PNM has presided over strong economic growth, but struggled to combat the growing sense that crime is out of control. Three weeks out from the vote it remains the favorite, due to a strong party structure, and the fact that it is facing a splintered opposition. The race is not over, though, and both the United National Congress (UNC) and the Congress of the People (COP) parties have turned out large rally crowds, with the UNC counting on winning its traditional seats and some marginal ones to squeak to victory and the COP hoping that its new politics theme carries the day. END SUMMARY.

OFF AND RUNNING

2. (U) Trinidad and Tobago's electoral season is in full swing, having been kicked off by Prime Minister Manning's September 28 dissolution of Parliament and announcement of November 5 as Election Day. Since this pronouncement, the air waves, print media and public plazas have been overflowing with speeches, electoral posturing and rumors of party maneuverings. This year's vote once again pits the PNM and UNC against one another, but with a wild card thrown in the COP which split off from the UNC last year. The PNM has traditionally drawn much, though by no means all, of its support from Afro-Trinians and the UNC has largely, though not exclusively, drawn from an Indo-Trini base. Both parties, and the COP, though, have presented diverse lists of candidates and are seeking to appeal across all societal lines.

3. (SBU) Adding another layer of uncertainty to the race is the increase for this election in the number of House seats from 36 to 41. The redistricting that occurred as part of that increase had made projecting a winner in a number of new and old seats more difficult. In the outgoing House, the PNM held 20 seats to the opposition's

16. (Note: The Senate is an appointed body and not subject to popular vote.)

ADVANTAGES OF INCUMBENCY

¶4. (SBU) The PNM has some strong plusses in its favor. Aided by high energy prices, it has presided over a rapidly growing economy. Real GDP growth hit 12.2% in 2006 and is projected to increase 5.5% for 2007. The booming economy has cut unemployment to 4.5%, and the PNM also notes that 26,000 new housing units and 47 new schools have been built since the PNM won election five years ago.

¶5. (SBU) The recently announced 2008 budget also provides talking points for PNM candidates. It calls for increases in the minimum wage and in old-age pensions and other social programs. Manning mentions solid economic growth in all his stump speeches, and also cites the PNM's 50-year history and its record of experience and consistency. He also derides his opponents for their lack of concrete plans, programs, and experience and points to his QVision 2020Q manifesto Q the plan to have Trinidad and Tobago reach first world status in 13 years Q as indicative of his party's seriousness and sense of purpose.

NEGATIVES FAIL TO GAIN TRACTION

¶6. (SBU) Not all is positive, though, for the PNM. A sense of weariness over PNM rule exists, though this often is coupled with a sense of inevitability over its continued governing. There also are a number of issues of concern to the electorate, including especially violent crime (murders are over 250 this year), problems in the public health sector, inflation, rural infrastructure deficiencies, potential depletion of oil and gas reserves, bad roads, and traffic chaos. However, claims by the opposition that they would address these problems more effectively than the PNM

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have so far failed to gain traction, perhaps because neither the UNC nor COP have presented their governing platforms. The soap opera-like coverage of much of the political campaign also has buried substantive points made by parties far below the headlines.

¶7. (SBU) The opposition has its troubles as well. The UNC, in particular, is hampered by a sense that its leader (and former Prime Minister) Basdeo Panday is more interested in personal power than party success and that his time may have passed. He also has been accused of corruption and lost his seat in the last parliament due to still-unresolved legal difficulties. Despite this, he remains a folk hero to many in the UNC, and probably is the party's main attraction and problem at the same time. COP leader Winston Dookeran, who left the UNC after sparring with Panday, is not seen as corrupt and is drawing some support from upper-middle class voters and professionals with his Qnew politicsQ message and conscious effort to cross racial and ethnic lines, but he has been vague on any governing plans.

Dissension in the Ranks

¶8. (SBU) The candidate selection process has been chaotic for both the PNM and UNC, and only somewhat less so for the COP. This has left some scars, most notably in the PNM, where Manning eased out a number of party heavyweights and replaced them with lesser known figures. At the end of the day, the PNM kept only six incumbents, recycled three other party figures, and brought in 32 new candidates. Some displaced candidates made noises about Manning seeking to eliminate any strong opposition voices in the party, and the UNC and COP charged it was another indication of Manning's Qdictatorial tendencies. Manning explained simply that he was replacing poor performers, those disliked by their constituents, and seeking to bring a new generation of leaders into the PNM. Grumbling aside, and perhaps hopeful they might get a future

government appointment (several current cabinet ministers are appointed senators), most former MPs have come around to endorse the new slate.

¶9. (SBU) The UNC, for its part, has been unable or unwilling to say who would be Prime Minister if it won a parliamentary majority. It has created an unwieldy dual-hatted structure with Panday and party-financier Jack Warner running the show. Popular UNC member Kamla Persad-Bissessar, thought to have a shot at being the UNC prime minister candidate, lost out to Panday and Warner. This led to one of her supporters blasting Panday and Warner and leaving the UNC alliance. Kamla let it be known she was unhappy (using the tune "No woman, No cry" as her introduction at a major UNC event), but remained in the party. The COP has had less open difficulties picking candidates, but has still has not finalized its full slate.

Comment: Three weeks to go

¶10. (SBU) With about three weeks to go until the November 5 election, the PNM seems to enjoy the advantage, but there remains time for the electoral scenery to change. A combined opposition might have enough force to beat the PNM, but the COP has rebuffed repeated calls for unity from the UNC, saying it cannot work with Panday. One respected political analyst has suggested to us that right now the PNM has 18 safe seats, only three shy of a majority (though 13 shy of the "special majority" of 31 needed to change the constitution and introduce a presidential system that Manning is said to favor). This analyst also felt that the UNC currently has 13 safe seats, leaving only ten in contention. The COP also is seen as a force capable of an electoral breakthrough and surprise and it has been the talk of the campaign here due to its drawing big crowds and gaining several prominent endorsements, but some posit that it may win a large percentage of votes, but no single district ("constituency").

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